

Book Review: The Gingrich Senators: The Roots of Partisan Warfare in Congress by Sean M. Theriault

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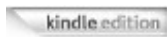
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Sean M. Theriault aims to document the U.S. Senate's demise over the last 30 years by showing how one group of senators has been at the forefront of this transformation: the "Gingrich Senators". They are more conservative, more likely to engage in tactics that obstruct the legislative process, and more likely to oppose Democratic presidents than even their fellow other Republicans. **Richard Armstrong** recommends the read to those interested in US politics and governance.



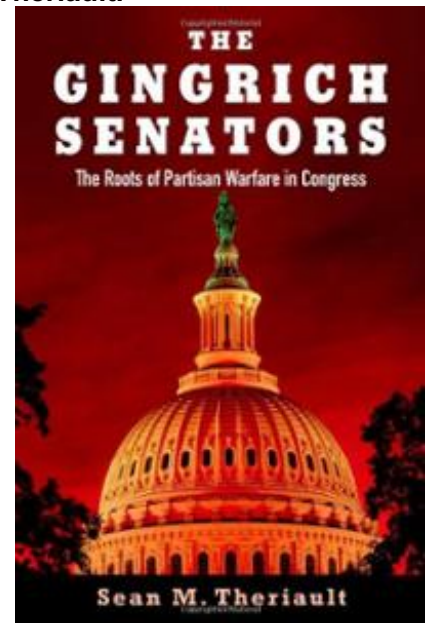
The Gingrich Senators: The Roots of Partisan Warfare in Congress. Sean M. Theriault. Oxford University Press. May 2013.

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On September 30th the US government ran out of money it needs to run and was forced to 'shutdown'. By the end of October, the United States will hit the debt ceiling. This limits the amount of money it can borrow to pay its existing debts. If the debt ceiling isn't raised then the United States will default, something that would have devastating effects on the global economy. Two years ago when the debt ceiling was nearly breached, Moody's downgraded the US to AA. How did American politics get to the point where the traditionally routine debt ceiling vote became a nail biter that could result in default?

[Sean M. Theriault](#), a professor at the University of Texas, places the blame for the 'partisan warfare' in Congress on the impact of Newt Gingrich. Newt Gingrich was the Republican congressman who led the GOP to take over the House of Representatives in 1994, the first time since the 1950s they controlled that body. As Speaker of the House he clashed with President Clinton, leading to two government shutdowns in 1995. The public blamed the Republicans for the shutdown (which seems to be happening this time too). Theriault looks at the impact Gingrich had on the Senate, arguing that a group he calls 'Gingrich Senators' increased partisanship to an unprecedented degree and led to the current dysfunction. He defines Gingrich Senators as Republican Senators who previously served in the House and were elected after 1978 (that being the year Gingrich won his first House election).



Theriault makes a convincing argument that in the years he looks at, 1978-2010, these Gingrich senators were more partisan and ideologically extreme than their Republican colleagues. But he is less convincing on *why* these Senators act as they do. For a better look into the motivations of Tea party legislators, read Robert Draper's aptly titled [Do Not Ask What Good We Do](#).

Gingrich's impact wasn't ideological. The Republicans that were elected in this period were bound to be more conservative than their predecessors. These years saw the conservative resurgence in American politics, a broad cultural and political trend that Rick Perlstein looks at in two great books, [Before the Storm](#), and [Nixonland](#). Instead, Gingrich's impact on the House, and according to Theriault later the Senate, was political. He was much more aggressive and partisan than previous Republican leaders in the House, willing to smear his Democratic opponents, and use procedural means to gum up the works. He also instilled message discipline on Republican candidates, teaching them how to win ([this](#) classic 1995 *New Yorker* profile gives a great overview of Gingrich's rise and how he

led the GOP to victory in 1994).



Newt Gingrich speaking at the Republican Leadership Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Credit: [Gage Skidmore](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

In the final part of the book Theriault looks at the future of the Gingrich senators. He touches on Gingrich's failed presidential run for the 2012 nomination, which shows that though he may have been a success in helping his party succeed electorally and left the GOP a playbook that they still use, his own career peaked in 1994. While colleagues were grateful to him for leading them out of the wilderness, they didn't feel much personal loyalty to him. As Speaker he wasn't particularly successful. He never recovered from the impression that he forced the government shutdown because [Bill Clinton snubbed him on a trip overseas](#). His leadership style alienated many, and when ethics charges were brought against him in 1997, colleagues were quick to attempt to oust him. It failed and although he managed to hold on to the Speakership for another two years, but he was a [lame duck](#) by then. Likewise, Theriault describes how during Gingrich's presidential run the opposition he faced from the Gingrich senators themselves wasn't just passive it was *active*.

When looking at the Tea Party senators who came to office in 2010, Theriault shows that they had higher extremism score's than not just the average Republican senator, but also the average Gingrich senators. Readers will come away from the book thinking that in years to come the Gingrich cohorts will seem like a bunch of [RINOs](#) compared to the Tea Party generation. Theriault touches on Jim DeMint here. The now-former senator from South Carolina served in the House with Gingrich and seems to have learned the right lessons from his mentor's career. He has much more personal influence that Gingrich ever did, inspiring not just loyalty but fear. For many Republican politicians, their biggest fear isn't a tough general election against a Democrat, but a primary challenge from the right supported by DeMint and his network of supporters and organizations. His influence is so great that in September *Businessweek* called him the '[shadow speaker](#)'. In the future we may see a book called the *DeMint Senators*. A convincing argument can be made that DeMint rather than Gingrich was more important in the opposition to Barack Obama. And if current trends hold, legislators inspired by DeMint will be even more partisan and ideological than the members of the Gingrich Revolution.

The Gingrich Senators is one of those books to be overtaken by events by the time it is published. If it had come out three years ago it would have been a more satisfying explanation for the vociferousness of the opposition President Obama has faced. But with the rise of the Tea Party, the Gingrich senators don't seem quite as bad. They may just have been ahead of the curve. In retrospect, the dysfunctional Senate at the start of Obama's presidency seems a mild irritant compared to today's anarchic House leading the country to shutdown and maybe even default.

Richard Armstrong is recent M.A. graduate from Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations in New Jersey. His research interests include international security, U.S. foreign policy and the Middle East. He was previously an Editorial Assistant at World Policy Journal in New York. [Read more reviews by Richard.](#)

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